NCA
VOC TO IOP/FN

BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0606 APRIL 20, 1976
WAYNE COREY/BANGKOK

LAOS TODAY

ANNCR:

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, THE COMMUNIST PATHET LAO IN A BLOODLESS AND GRADUAL TAKEOVER, CONSOLIDATED THEIR CONTROL OVER LAOS. AS COMMUNIST RULE TIGHTENED, NEWS ABOUT EVENTS IN LAOS BECAME MORE DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN. IN BANGKOK, VOA'S WAYNE COREY HAS GATHERED INFORMATION FROM MANY SOURCES AND HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT ON LAOS TODAY:

VOICE:

FROM THE ACCOUNTS GIVEN BY RECENT TRAVELERS FROM LAOS, AS WELL AS LAO REFUGEES HERE IN THAILAND, AND THE OFFICIAL LAO NEWS MEDIA, IT IS POSSIBLE TO PIECE TOGETHER A REASONABLY ACCURATE PICTURE OF LIFE IN WHAT WAS ONCE CALLED THE LAND OF A MILLION ELEPHANTS. THE THREE MILLION PEOPLE OF LAOS, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN THE CITIES, ARE BEING SLOWLY BUT STEADILY CONDITIONED TO ACCEPT A LOWER STANDARD OF LIVING UNDER COMMUNISM.

THE LAO CAPITAL, VIENTIANE, IS APPARENTLY EVEN MORE QUIET THEN IT WAS BEFORE -- WHEN IT WAS DESCRIBED BY THE "ALL -- ASIA GUIDE" AS A CHARMING ASIAN BACK-WATER TOWN. BUT RECENT TRAVELERS FROM LAOS SAY THAT JUST BELOW THE SURFACE, AND SOMETIMES EVEN QUITE VISIBLE, IS A TENSION, FED BY THE CONTINUING ARREST OF PEOPLE WHO ARE SENT AWAY FOR RE-EDUCATION. OF THE THOUSANDS WHO HAVE BEEN PICKED UP BY THE PATHET LAO, VERY FEW HAVE RETURNED TO THEIR FAMILIES.

THE TRAVELERS SPEAK OF THE INCREASINGLY WELL ORGANIZED GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN. THE GOVERNMENT CONTROLS

THE NATIONAL RADIO AND THE NEWSPAPERS. BILLBOARDS HAVE BEEN PLACED AT SEVERAL POINTS IN VIENTIANE. AND LOUDSPEAKERS IN THE MAIN BUSINESS AREA BLARE OUT COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA AND MUSIC.

BECAUSE OF RESTRICTIONS ON FOREIGN VISITORS, THE LUXURY ITEMS SEEN IN MANY SHOPS BEFORE THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER ARE NO LONGER AVAILABLE. ABOUT HALF THE SHOPS ARE CLOSED AND THOSE WHICH REMAIN OPEN HAVE LIMITED STOCK OF GENERALLY BASIC NECESSITIES. YET, DESPITE THE INCREASING DRABNESS OF LIFE IN LAOS TODAY, TRAVELERS WHO WERE IN VIENTIANE DURING THE CELEBRATION OF BONG KRAN, THE LAO NEW YEAR, REPORT THAT SOME YOUNG PATHET LAO SOLDIERS DRESSED IN THEIR BAGGY GREEN UNIFORMS WITHOUT INSIGNA OF RANK, VIOLATED ORDERS AND JOINED CIVILIANS IN THE REFRESHING TRADITION OF THROWING WATER ON PEOPLE WHO PASSED BY THEM. PATHET LAO SOLDIERS MAY ALSO BE SEEN MINGLING FREELY AND EASILY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE, SOME OF WHOM EVEN WEAR WHAT SENIOR COMMUNIST OFFICIALS MIGHT CONSIDER DECANDENT WESTERN CLOTHING.

ASIDE FROM THE LAO PEOPLE WHO STILL PURSUE THEIR LIKING FOR FRIENDLY CONVERSATION IN THE NOODLE SHOPS, THE OCCASIONAL FOREIGNERS REPORTED BEING SEEN ON THE STREEETS OF VIENTIANE THESE DAYS ARE SOVIETS AND A FEW FRENCH. THE STREETS ARE VIRTUALLY DESERTED BY TEN O'CLOCK AT NIGHT ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO OFFICIAL CURFEW.

LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE. BUT REPORTS REACHING BANGKOK SAY THAT ANTI-COMMUNIST REBELS HAVE BEEN LAUNCHING SPORADIC HIT-AND-RUN ATTACKS ALONG THE THAI-LAO BORDER. THE GOVERNMENT REPORTEDLY HAS

CALLED ON PATHET LAO TROOPS TO LAUNCH A MAJOR EFFORT TO WIPE THEM OUT. THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN A FEW GRENADE ATTACKS IN VIENTIANE ITSELF, AGAINST THE SOVIET AND CUBAN EMBASSIES AND THE NATIONAL RADIO. BUT TRAVELERS FROM THE LAO CAPITAL SAY ANTI-GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY DOES NOT AS YET SEEM TO POSE ANY SERIOUS THREAT TO COMMUNIST RULE IN LAOS.

JS/PDM